



ZOLTÁN CSEPREGI

## The beginnings of Protestant church districts and bishoprics in Hungary

### 1. *Criteria for the study of the 16th century Hungarian Protestant church districts and bishoprics*

For the organization, review and evaluation the data, I use three categories and seven criteria in total:

- Entering into office
  - Medieval organizational background
  - The election
- Function
  - Ordination
  - Visitation
  - Discipline in the Church
- Legal status
  - Canons governing the tasks
  - Use of titles

Examples of the application of these criteria will abound in the study of early ecclesiastical polity, with only the last concept, the use of titles, requiring preliminary explanation.

A) The Protestant leaders who held episcopal office bore a wide variety of titles in our sources: *archidiaconus*, *episcopus*, *püspök* (*pispek*), *senior primarius* (*senior supremus*), *superattendens*, *superintendens*. The differences in content of these designations are not worth over-explaining. The Latin word *superintendens* (*superattendens*) is nothing more but the literal translation of the Greek word *episcopos*, and the word *superintendens* is simply translated in contemporary Hungarian texts as *püspök*, while the titles *archidiaconus* and *vicearchidiaconus*, still widely used in the mid-16th century, are replaced by the designation *senior*, which became dominant in Hungary at this time.

B) The literature sometimes emphasizes the distinction between the *endonymy* or *exonymy* of a title of ecclesiastical leader, i.e. whether the person concerned

applies it to himself or herself or whether others honor him or her with the title. I will not pay much attention to such distinctions below.

C) Early Reformation was characterized by the idea rooted in the apostolic age, that each congregation should be led by its own bishop (*episcopus*). This is why the use of the episcopal title appears in the reformist correspondence of the 1520s (mainly in addresses and titles). The word *episcopus* thus has at least three different Protestant interpretations throughout the period: it is used in the medieval sense for the head of a larger unit (*dioecesis*); it has a Pauline/New Testament meaning, i.e. the leading pastor of a town (as a synonym for parish priest, 1 Tim 3:1–7; Tit 1:5–9; Acts 20:28); but it can also be applied to any rank of pastor, the best known example being Paulus Speratus, who served as a preacher, i.e. subordinate to a parish priest in principle, in his Morvaigló congregation, yet consciously used the authority of the title of bishop. This particularity can easily lead to misunderstandings and makes it difficult to assess sources accurately.

Jenő Zoványi presents the historical data on the problem in chronological order, thus inadvertently creating a competition for primacy: who was the first Protestant bishop in Hungary. In my current discussion, I am therefore determined to avoid chronological ordering. The data and related questions are presented in more of a geographical order:

#### Ottoman Hungary

Lower Danubia (Baranya Country church district)

Temesköz (the plain enclosed by the Mures, the Tisza and the Danube)

#### Tiszántúl (Transcistibiscan district) (Partium)

Tiszahát (Szatmár church district)

Debrecen

#### Transylvania

Nagyszeben (Saxon) church district

Kolozsvár (Hungarian) church district

#### Kingdom of Hungary

The Five Towns (Kassa, Eperjes, Lőcse, Bártfa, and Kisszeben)

Cistibiscan district (Tiszáninnen)

Upper Danubia (Csallóköz-Mátyusföld)

Western Transdanubia

Murány (Kishont and Gömör)

## 2. Church organizations in Ottoman Hungary

### THE BEGINNINGS OF REFORMATION IN OTTOMAN HUNGARY, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE “BARANYA” CHURCH DISTRICT

In 1551, Mihály Sztárai wrote to Miklós Tétényi to Ráckeve:

“It had been seven years since I, by the will of God, began to preach the word of the cross in Turkish-ruled Lower Baranya, as the first and only one in the town

of Laskó, a Hungarian mile from Eszék, and from here and beyond the Danube and the Drava, with other brethren, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, I have built 120 churches, in all of which the word of the Lord is preached and received in unison, and with such clarity that many claim to have seen no better organized churches, not even those in which the word of the Lord has been preached for 30 years.”

This quote testifies to several things; firstly, to the ecclesiastical (apostolic) consciousness of Sztárai. Although he does not call himself a bishop at this time, but the duties he describes suggest such an office. And the “seven years” period points to the year 1544, to the fall of the castle of Pécs. From that time on, the presbytery of Pécs functioned as a titular see for a century and a half, the holders of the title living far from Pécs and being prevented from carrying out their episcopal ministry. The post was vacant, and Sztárai took over the bishop’s role, if not without a struggle, but with a chance of success. As he wrote in the letter quoted above, that he defeated “the Pope’s men” in several disputes of faith and “forced them beyond the Tisza and Sava.”

The organization of 120 churches obviously also meant putting pastors in ministry, but more than that is known about exercising the authority of ordination in the case of Sztárai. In particular, we know the names of two of the pastors he ordained, the parish of Somorja, János, mentioned in the Esztergom diocesan visitation books, and István Szegedi Kis. Namely, Sztárai (keeping his own bishopric of Tolna) sent Szegedi as superintendent to Laskó in 1554, who thus became the archpastor (*generalis superintendens*) not only of the Lower Baranya but also of the Upper Baranya tract.

The canons of the Protestant church districts of South Transdanubia can be found in the manuscript of the surviving Hungarian-language canonical book, which has been called in professional literature the “55-section code” for the sake of identification. Articles 33–35 regulate visitation, discipline and ordination. The fact that the canons originated in Ottoman Hungary is attested to by Article 52, which forbids clergymen to dress in Turkish attire. The dating of the text is supported by the fact that Article 28 presupposes the simultaneous functioning of several superintendents in addition to the seniors, which may indicate the second half of the 1550s. Article 36 requires the pastors to read the Hungarian Bible, by which the text probably means not only the New Testament of Sárvár, but also the volumes of the Kolozsvár translation.

The problem in accurately dating the bishopric of Sztárai is that there is no record of his election or entering into office, and the earliest date of him using the title of *episcopus* appears in 1551.

#### TEMESKÖZ (THE PLAIN ENCLOSED BY THE MURES, THE TISZA AND THE DANUBE)

In the autumn of 1541, the Sultan appointed István Petrovics, a relative of the Szapolya family, as the prince of Temesvár, and at the same time legally annexed Temesköz to the Ottoman Empire. Petrovics respected this dependency for the next decade as well, although he retained his identity as Hungarian knight banneret, and represented Hungarian rather than Turkish interests in his politics.

Under the patronage of Petrovics, two synods were held in 1549 and 1550 at the patron's mansion in Torony (today: Turnu, RO), Csanád County: in the first of which Máté Gönci was elected bishop (*superintendens*) and in the second one the diocesan visitation was regulated in 19 points. We are also informed about this evolution by the biography of István Szegedi Kis, who was the head of the Temesvár school operating in the center of the diocese during these two synods. It is important to note that at this time the bishopric of Csanád was not actually filled. According to the Reformed concept of law, when the bishop's duties were not fulfilled, the bishop's authority was transferred to the holder of the secular power (*Notbischof*), who could in turn delegate it to the elected representative of the clergy, that is, to Máté Gönci in this case.

In 1551, after Isabella Jagiellon's abdication and on her direct orders, Petrovics handed over the castles in his hands to Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor's captain, the Catholic István Losonczi, and left for Munkács, and from there to Poland, thus ceasing his patronage. Following this, there is no more news from the Protestant church district. In 1552, Temesköz came under direct Ottoman administration.

### 3. Church organizations in the Transcistibiscan (*Tiszántúl*) region

#### TISZAHÁT (SZATMÁR CHURCH DISTRICT)

In the late Middle Ages, Szatmár County and the surrounding areas formed the Tasnád vicariate of the Transylvanian bishopric. The vicariate, as in Pécs and Csanád mentioned above, was virtually vacant, and this vacuum in church administration may have facilitated the establishment of the Protestant church organization.

The election of Demeter Tordai as bishop at the Óvár Synod of 13 March, 1554 is more precisely recorded. The Óvár Articles adopted here use the term *superattendens* and mention the maintenance of church discipline as their first task (§ 9). In the following year, the canons of the Erdőd Synod already entrusted the ordination and the administration of pastoral elections to this *superintendens* and his fellow magistrates (§ 1, 20). Tordai's successor, Sebestyén Károlyi Boldi also signed the *Consensus doctrinae* in 1557 as holder of the *superintendens* title.

The 1555 Erdőd Canons, however eloquently they detail the activities of the bishops of Tiszahát, are of less value as resources because they have obviously been edited afterwards.

#### DEBRECEN

Yet the first archpastor of the Transcistibiscan (*Tiszántúl*) region will be found in the person of Péter Melius Juhász. However, we learn of the election for Melius in 1561. Debrecen's growing importance, not only in ecclesiastical but also in cultural terms, is closely linked to the fate of Várad: first its transformation into a fortress, then the Turkish siege stalled the development of the former humanist center.

Thanks to the printing press in Debrecen, in the case of Melius we do not have to complain about a lack of sources, nor about subsequent editing that diminishes the authenticity of the manuscript tradition. The bishop's responsibilities are described in voluminous documents, the *Confessio catholica* of 1562, and

the *Articuli maiores* of 1567. While the former uses the term *episcopus* (both to criticize the Catholic prelates and to portray the ideal of the Protestant bishop), the *Articuli maiores* already uses the title *superintendens*. At the Debrecen Synod of 1567, delegates from 14 presbyteries from the Transcistibiscan and three from the Cistibiscan district participated, so Melius was already the superintendent of over ten deans. It was no accident that his Unitarian opponents parodied him as “Pope Peter” in the 1570 *Debreceni disputa*.

The tasks of the bishop of Debrecen were defined by the canons compiled by Melius, primarily in the field of church discipline. The right of ordination is explicitly taken away from the bishop by the canons and given to the community of deans, and even the publicity of the synod was required for this event. It is likely that a similar procedure was established earlier in the Tiszahát region, although the canons there are less detailed about the examination and ordination.

#### 4. Church organizations in Transylvania

##### NAGYSZEBEN (SAXON) CHURCH DISTRICT

The *Reformatio ecclesiarvm Saxonicarvm in Transylvania*, printed in Brasov in 1547 and enacted by the Saxon *universitas* in 1550, was intended to unify this newly formed union of Saxon chapters in doctrine and ceremonial practice. In the text of the *Reformatio ecclesiarvm* we find only indirect references to the episcopal functions under consideration. The call, examination and ordination of pastors is to be regulated by the document according to the practice of Wittenberg, which had already been established by that time: “Whosoever therefore has not first been examined as to his morals and qualifications, and has not a sound and legitimate call, shall no more be ordained among our people, nor be admitted to the sacred ministry of the Church.” The passive grammatical structure of this sentence is very revealing: it does not at all suggest that by this time the Saxons had taken the power of ordination into their own hands.

The same open end wording appears in the regulation of excommunication, i.e. church discipline: instead of a one-person decision, the code provides for a majority vote for the most severe ecclesiastical punishment, but does not specify who are involved in the decision. The *Reformatio ecclesiarvm* refers the visitation rights to the competence of the deans of the pastoral chapters.

On 6 February 1553, the former canon of Laibach, Paul Wiener, was elected head of the new bishopric of Nagyszeben. The sources then used the designation *superattendens*, and in 1557 Wiener’s successor, Matthias Hebler, together with his fellow bishops, signed the above-mentioned *Consensus doctrinae*, already using the title *superintendens*. Wiener died the year after his election, so not much is known about his work. He certainly did not ordain clergy, because the Saxons ordained their own priests only abroad until the 1570s.

##### KOLOZSVÁR (HUNGARIAN) CHURCH DISTRICT

Ferenc Dávid is the person whose entering into office is the most accurately known. Mihály Balázs pointed out that Dávid, in his letter to Kassa in March

1557, had not yet referred to his episcopal office, but in June of the same year he signed the *Consensus doctrinae as superintendent* (third in the line, i.e. the youngest in terms of office). Thus, Balázs dates Dávid's election to the spring of 1557, and also allows the assumption that it was the convening of the Diet of Torda and the planned signing of the theological consensus doctrine that may have motivated the people of Cluj-Napoca to elevate their leading pastor to the position of superintendent, as an equal partner of Boldi Sebestyén Károlyi and Matthias Hebler.

In the case of Ferenc Dávid's bishopric, a medieval organizational framework is again visible in the background: the – already vacant – vicariate of Gyulafehérvár, which roughly delineates the boundaries of the new Protestant church district. In contrast to Ottoman Hungary, in Transylvania we are not simply dealing with a vacuum of church administration, but rather with the secularization of episcopal power, i.e. the *Notbischof* phenomenon familiar from German Reformation (see above the examples of Temesköz and Tiszahát). The prince acts as head of the church, affirming the office of the elected superintendents and sometimes even removing them from office.

Dávid cannot be said to have been a particularly passive bishop. As a religious polemicist, writer, theologian and, last but not least, as a successful influencer of urban and royal politics, he became one of the dominant figures in Transylvania in the following decade. However, in his case little is known about his performance of classical episcopal functions, perhaps only the calling of synods (which he did regularly) was part of it.

## 5. Church organizations in the Kingdom of Hungary

### THE FIVE FREE ROYAL TOWNS OF UPPER-HUNGARY

The five-town church district is completely unique in that it cannot be traced back to any late-medieval precedents. The five towns were all located in the Eger presbytery, but in three different counties. The manuscript tradition tells us that in 1546, at the synod of Eperjes, the representatives of the towns accepted the Eperjes Canons and elected the Bártfa parish priest Michael Radaschin as their chief pastor. Yet, we have to be cautious about the fact that all the details about Radaschin's election and the canons that set out his duties seem to perfectly fit together.

Namely, what the Eperjes articles say about the duties of the “bishop” of the five towns is too good to be true. We can see the full triad of the power of ordination-visitation-ecclesiastical discipline, as well as a textual reference to the relevant letters of the Apostle Paul. There is only one circumstance that tones this ideal of ecclesiastical law: we only have records of actual ordinations by the five towns from the 1560s (three ordained persons can be identified by name). István Botta dates a significant change in the ecclesiastical organization in the Five Towns to 1560; probably the so-called “Sárosi Articles” were also created at this time. We cannot rule out the possibility that the text of the Eperjes canons was also updated at this time. We must therefore accept the acts and organizational decisions of the 1546 Eperjes synod as authentic, but we cannot identify the text of the decisions taken there with the document of the Eperjes canons handed down to us.

## THE CISTIBISCAN COUNTIES

Zoványi formulates a general idea that the task of ordaining ministers was carried out by Protestant fraternities organized by counties, following the tradition of the medieval vice-archdeacons, which, even if it was not exactly the case elsewhere, seems to be true for the Cistibiscan region. According to Zoványi, the leaders of these presbyteries first bore the traditional title of *vicearchidiaconus* which was replaced by *senior* in the 1560s, although the designation *episcopus* also appears in the somewhat later canons of Borsod-Gömör.

It is a question when this organizing can be estimated to have started. The data on the activity of the deans, the decrees of the Tarcal (1562) and the Gönc (1566) synods, and the matching contemporary literature all point to the 1560s. In the Esztergom diocesan visitation books, however, there is an interesting entry about a pastor who visited the town of Torna in 1561: *affirmat se esse ordinatum per manus impositionem in Zyko*. This sentence certainly points to the practice before the synods of Tarcal and Gönc. Ferenc Mohi, the minister of Szikszó in Abaúj county from 1556 who may already have been the dean of Borsod, is probably the person behind the entry. In the Cistibiscan region, in addition to ordination, visitation and discipline are also traceable among the duties of the deans.

## UPPER DANUBIA (CSALLÓKÖZ-MÁTYUSFÖLD)

In the Kingdom of Hungary, the newly evolving Protestant church organizations were cautious about using the title *episcopus* “bishop.” We have seen that in Upper-Hungary, both in the case of the counties in of the Eger bishopric and in the case of the towns (*exempt* parishes) dependent on Esztergom, the words *archidiaconus* and *vicearchidiaconus*, and later on other words with the meaning “dean” (*esperes*) were used to designate the leaders within the ecclesiastical government. Here, the Catholic hierarchy still had real power; it even exercised its jurisdiction and could count on the direct support of the monarch and the state apparatus.

I mentioned the Somorja parish priest János, trained by Gál Huszár in Magyaróvár and ordained by Sztárai in Tolna. This is the only documented case attesting to that the authority and function of Sztárai as bishop was recognized and accepted not only in Tolna-Baranya, but also beyond the borders of Ottoman Hungary. For the churches operating in the context of the Roman Catholic dioceses that still existed, it could have been a convenient solution to use the services of a “bishop” living under Ottoman rule, when a foreigner was not available.

The situation changed with the death of Archbishop Miklós Oláh of Esztergom (1568), which was followed by a long vacancy; his successor Antal Verancsics took office only after a delay of one and a half years. From later (17th-18th century) records it seems that the Csallóköz-Mátyusföld superintendency was organized under the leadership of Gál Huszár, minister of Komját at this time, to take advantage of this vacancy. Similar events were repeated in 1573 with the death of Antal Verancsics, which was followed by an even longer vacancy. At this time it was Péter Bornemisza who took over the episcopal functions, and in his case the use of the title *superintendens* (1574), as well as the function of ordination are well documented.

## WESTERN TRANSDANUBIA

The seal and flag of the still existing Transdanubian Diocese of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Hungary bears the year of its foundation, 1576. This date refers to the election of Máté Szegedi, and the source of the date is the preface to the Hungarian translation of the *Formula concordiae* magyar fordításának előszava (1598). Szegedi, the court preacher of Ferenc Nádasdy, one of the most important landlords of the region, used the title *superintendens* and his duties were mainly aimed at maintaining church discipline.

Two former bishops, Mihály Sztárai and Gál Huszár being papal clergy in the preceding decade, raises the question whether the emphasis on the 1576 foundation date is not too cautious. István Botta collects sources and 18th-century historiographical data on the papal activities of the two, and argues that the bishopric of Western Transdanubia may have existed before 1576. Botta emphasizes the (*exempt*) legal status of the papal citadel and parish as dependent on Esztergom, therefore he does not examine the question in relation to the diocese of Győr or Veszprém, but primarily in relation to the Archdiocese of Esztergom. The ecclesiastical context of the problem is thus identical to the one we have already seen above in connection with Csallóköz-Mátyusföld: the permanent vacancy of the archbishop's chair in 1568 and 1573. According to Botta, this is how the Transdanubian roster looks like after all: Mihály Sztárai – Gál Huszár – Máté Szegedi.

## MURÁNY (KISHONT AND GÖMÖR)

Just as the organizing force of the Five Town church district was not a medieval model, but a political alliance of the five towns, so in the case of the Murány church district, we can recognize the role of a political centre, the Murány castle and manor. This was underlined by the fact that the superintendents of Murány were also the preachers of the Murány garrison and the court of the castle captain. The two traditional archdeaconries on the territory of which the new Protestant ecclesiastical organization was established, Kishont and Gömör, influenced the formation of the bishopric of Murány at most to the extent that they provided a legitimate basis for the use of the title of *superintendens* by the head of the church district covering the two counties.

The first superintendent of the district, Cyprianus Friedt, compiled the first version of the so-called Murány Articles around 1585, and the articles were expanded by his successor Johannes Rimanoviani in 1594. The superintendent was elected (*electo superintendente*), and the canons assigned him mainly ecclesiastical duties. This picture is completed by the so-called *Protocollum Rimanovianum*, the first surviving record of the church district, which – besides the creeds, normative provisions and synodal decisions and the signing thereof – contains mainly diocesan visitation records (from 1596 onwards).

## 6. Findings

Historical sources concerning elections of bishops are rare. In particular, in the context of the leaders' entry into office, it is important to note that the preceding



ecclesiastical unit remaining from the Middle Ages was mostly vacant, presenting a vacuum in church administration. According to the 1942 theory of Ödön Miklós, the Protestant presbyteries developed from the late medieval pastoral fraternities, and the office of the dean goes back to the office of *vicearchidiaconus*. For me, the signs of continuity are not evident here, but I can see the negative imprint of a framework that had already been dismantled, like a vacuum, in the form of the tasks left unattended. From a Protestant point of view, the vacant offices of church leaders meant a model and a challenge, as well as an extended room for action, a phenomenon that was naturally seen by opponents as an abuse and usurpation of office.

In the three parts of the country, the same phenomenon led to three different processes: in Ottoman Hungary, the leaders who acted with apostolic consciousness were given episcopal authority by their environment; in Transylvania, the elected bishops were confirmed in office by the prince; while in the Kingdom of Hungary, the Catholic church leaders fought persistently and, depending on the balance of power, with varying degrees of success against the gaining ground of Protestant church leaders who deliberately avoided the title of bishop.

The legal status of the leaders is described via a wide variety of terms. The Tarcal creed, for example, listed five possible variants: *antistes*, *senior*, *rector*, *director*, *intendens*. The word *episcopus*, as I mentioned, had been deliberately avoided here. On this basis, Dénes Dienes rightly assumes that there was a heated debate about the naming of leaders at the Tarcal synod. At the beginning of my study, I pointed out that the interpretation of these titles in canon law is complicated by several problems.

Among the functions of bishops, ordination is the most frequently documented one, and visitation the least frequent. The actual age of the canons governing the functions of bishops is often questionable, or often bears traces of subsequent revisions. Especially because of the lack and the contamination of resources, the question of the primacy of church districts cannot be answered (Baranya? The Five Towns? Temesköz? Transylvania? Tiszahát?).